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Carter Cautious on Salvadoran Situation

The Carter administration is tiptoeing gingerly around the edge of the fabulous Mexican oil discoveries. In nearby El Salvador, for instance, President Carter has given quiet support to the middle-of-the-road junta that has managed to cling to power under siege from both left and right.

Evidently Carter learned a lesson from his ignominious role in the Nicaraguan revolution. So far, he has resisted the siren songs of both the intelligence community and arch-conservatives in Congress.

Resisting this pressure has not been easy. The Salvadoran left wing has Cuban President Fidel Castro in its corner; the right wing has Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and Rep. Robert Bauman (R-Md.). The rightists also seem to have the American Legion, the American Security Council and the CIA.

Major Roberto d'Abuisson, leader of an unsuccessful rightist coup in May, visited Washington recently, as did Salvadoran businessman Alfredo Mena Lagos. The two men head the Broad National Front, a supposedly "respectable" right-oriented party that claims growing support in the Congress. They were shown around Capitol Hill by officials of the legion and the American Security Council, a conservative group that lobbies for greater defense spending.

Thus congressional conservatives and the American Legion have given their blessings to extremists who are constantly condemning and undermining U.S. policy in El Salvador. At one point, d'Abuisson made a veiled threat against the U.S. charge d'affaires on nationwide television.

And Mena Lagos, with undiplomatic arrogance no doubt bolstered by his warm reception on Capitol Hill, accused

the State Department of "railroading socialism into El Salvador" by supporting the shaky junta.

While the right-wing Salvadorans have been lobbying our Congress with disturbing success, the Defense Intelligence Agency was adding fuel to the fire by detailing Castro's behind-the-scenes involvement in behalf of the Salvadoran leftists.

The intelligence analysts reported behind closed doors that Castro has deliberately maintained a low profile, apparently for fear of provoking a countermove from the United States. Cuba's aid to the Salvadoran leftists takes the form of training and munitions supplies.

The intelligence experts conceded that the Salvadoran leftists are determined not to accept Cuban leadership as a price for Castro's help. "They neither seek nor will accept any leadership other than their own," the DIA analysts told a House committee, headed by Rep. Gus Yatron (D-Pa.).

Furthermore, the DIA said, "the threat of anarchy and a total collapse of the economy is as great a danger as that posed by the growing strength of the guerrillas."

The intelligence experts did not mention the U.S. stake in the area's political stability: The massive oil fields in nearby Mexico could reduce, perhaps eliminate, our dependence upon Persian Gulf oil.